

CLUMPING & THREADING

Stephen Cherry outlines his new approach to coping with the time pressures of ministry

RECALL THE DAY when I first looked at the "Management and Leadership" section of a bookshop. I was being a bit furtive. This did not feel right. I had been vicar of a parish for about four years, I think, and at last the penny had dropped: There is more work to be done in ministry than anyone ever imagines. In fact, there isn't time to do it all.

I was beginning to panic; but my first visit to the Management and Leadership section was not about finding a new job – it was a quest to see whether someone had the answer to the question of how you get everything done when there doesn't seem to be enough time.

And there began what has proved to be a productive exploration. I don't think that "time management" can resolve the time crisis in ministry, but given a bit of a twist, time management becomes "time wisdom".

'Given a bit of a twist, time management becomes "time wisdom"'

That's when ministry under pressure can begin to seem like a blessing rather than a curse – and the principles involved are relevant well beyond ministry, to anyone with real constraints on their time.

Every time management book I have ever come across suggests somewhere that you should make a "to do" list. I have always found this more difficult to do than the books suggest. My problem is that I tend to produce lists that go on, and on, and on.

Relief for me came, however, when I encountered the two-column list. In the left-hand column you list the things you "must" do. In the right hand column you list the things you "may" do. It's the right hand column which is so liberating. You can put here all the things which are desirable but not essential. Try it. Life really picks up when you find yourself doing something you actually want to do; it can give you the energy to go back and do something from the must-do list.

Another idea is clearing. I now enjoy clearing in the same way that I enjoy preparing the garden in the

spring or de-cluttering a cupboard. It is about making some significant space in your diary – space enough to get into things that you can't do in just a few minutes.

There are no special tricks when it comes to clearing. You just need the confidence to go for it; to say what Tuesday morning is for and stick to it. The great advantage is that this can have a really calming effect on the nerves. It takes you from: "I have no idea when I am going to get round to X" to "and next Tuesday I am going



to spend the morning on X and really get on top of it".

But there is something perhaps more powerful and less fully-appreciated than the clearing method. I call it threading. This is not about putting a half-day session in your diary, but about putting in 10, 20 or 30 minutes a day. It can be a really powerful way of getting far more done than you might think possible. I have only been able to write books by threading. At the outset of the project I do a little clearing – and you need some of that as the deadline for submission draws near. But most of the writing happens in small slots threaded into the diary. Projects are often like that. You need a few hours to get things started, but after that a little and often approach can be the key to getting a big job done.

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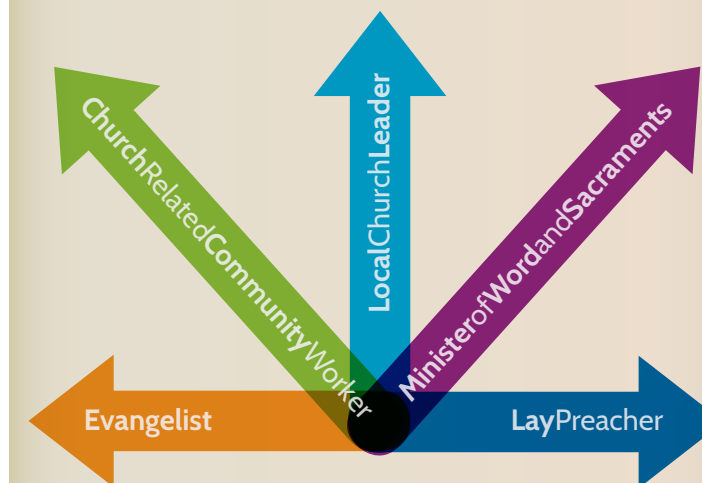
Then there is clumping. At one level this is really obvious. When we go to the supermarket we tend to buy all our vegetables at the same time. Well, mostly we do. I am quite capable of forgetting the carrots until among the dairy products. But I feel my life slipping by as I wander back to the groceries, knowing that the clock is ticking all the while. This is what clumping seeks to avoid: by grouping tasks together with no breaks between them.

Clumping can be a little more difficult to organise in the rough and tumble of one's daily workload than in the supermarket. And yet it is often worth the effort. The main question that lies behind it is: "What can I do alongside or before and after the thing I really must do?" In terms of the two-column list, it might be an idea to clump a few things from the "may do" column around the most pressing one in the "must do" list. This will be both time-efficient and more enjoyable than just doing the thing you can no longer avoid.

In all our dealings with time, the key is to try and adopt an attitude of believing there really is enough time to do everything that needs to be done. An old Irish proverb says: "When God made time, he made plenty." There is real time wisdom in that. Living as if we believe it to be true can be a hugely powerful witness in a world where everyone seems to be in a panic-driven rush.

The Revd Canon Dr **Stephen Cherry** is a residentiary canon of Durham Cathedral. His latest book is *Beyond Busyness: Time Wisdom for Ministry* (Sacristy Press, 2012). Next month, Dr Cherry offers a spiritual reflection on the meaning and value of time

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